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Edited by Leslie Bethell

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THE INDIANS OF THE CARIBBEAN AND CIRCUM-CARIBBEAN AT THE END OF THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

At the end of the fifteenth century A.D. the lands surrounding the Caribbean Sea were densely populated with people who were frequently organized into rank societies or chiefdoms of varying degrees of complexity. Among these polities two major spheres of political interaction can be delineated. The centre of one was the northern half of Colombia, with lower Central America (Panama and Costa Rica) and northern Venezuela as regional extensions to west and east, respectively. The centre of the other was the islands of Hispaniola and Puerto Rico in the Greater Antilles including Jamaica and Cuba. Geographically intermediate between these areas of higher political development, and in some ways linking them culturally, were the peoples of the Lesser Antilles, north-eastern Venezuela and the Venezuelan *llanos* (plains) north and west of the Orinoco river whose organization was less complex. On the periphery of the circum-Caribbean territories, that is, in eastern Nicaragua and Honduras, the Orinoco delta, and small portions of Cuba and Hispaniola, a few societies continued to exist at a still lower, tribal, level of cultural development.

Circum-Caribbean rank societies were composed of two social sectors of elites and commoners, hierarchically related. Hereditary membership in one or the other sector, together with additional distinctions in social status recognized particularly among members of the elite, conferred differential rights, obligations, and privileges on individuals and groups. For example, persons of high rank controlled select aspects of the production, distribution and consumption of resources. They supervised social relations within their group by periodic public admonishments and by authorizing sanctions for serious wrongdoing. They led squadrons of warriors into battle against external opponents. In these respects

‘The map which appears here in the printed edition has been removed for ease of use and now appears as an additional resource on the chapter overview page’.

elite activities helped to unite all members of society into a single polity; perhaps also into an integrated economic whole.

Other aspects of elite behaviour, however, emphasized the distinctions between commoners and those of high estate. Particularly significant in this context were the more exclusive or esoteric interests and practices associated with the acquisition and expression of elite power and authority. The search for power and authority was often conducted within the context of the supernatural, for awesome contacts with deities and sacred forces in supernaturally distant realms conveyed an analogous aura of sacredness and supremacy upon the ruler. Rulers probably also sought equally prestigious contacts, comparable to those effected with the supernatural, with other 'sacred' rulers living in geographically remote regions which, by virtue of their distance, were also 'sacred' lands.¹

Contacts with geographically and supernaturally distant places and peoples, and the superior knowledge and power they imparted, were given material expression by various sumptuary privileges assumed by the elite. Among these were the right to acquire, circulate and display rare and valuable 'luxury' goods, often in the form of personal adornments, which frequently derived from geographically distant 'sacred' realms. Elites and especially chiefs were also clad in exceptionally fine textiles, transported in litters and sometimes affected special 'languages' distinct from the vernacular. In life they dwelt apart from ordinary people in large and elaborately decorated elite centres or compounds and in death were buried in tombs richly stocked with elite goods including, not infrequently, a few sacrificed retainers or wives. The interests and activities of the common population, in contrast, were more localized spatially and were concerned with more mundane matters of daily subsistence and kin group well-being. Their adornments were fewer, their homes less elaborate and their burials simpler than those of their lords.

The cultural variety which characterized the circum-Caribbean as a whole was mirrored on a smaller scale in the cultural complexities of constituent regions. Colombia is a major case in point. By A.D. 1500 the organizational diversity of the numerous rank societies distributed throughout its three Andean cordilleras and the Caribbean lowlands

¹ The relationship between supernatural distance and geographical distance is discussed further in Mary W. Helms, *Ancient Panama: chiefs in search of power* (Austin, Texas, 1979).

was matched only by the heterogeneous topography and physiography of the country itself.

The highest levels of political development and regional influence were attained by a cluster of polities, including those of the Muisca or Chibcha, situated in highland basins of the Cordillera Oriental; of the so-called Tairona peoples, located along the Caribbean coast and in the adjacent foothills of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in extreme north-eastern Colombia; and of the Cenú, established in the north Colombian savannahs. Possibly the chiefdom of Dabeiba, situated in the northern Cordillera Occidental, and some of the Quimbaya polities on the western slopes of the Cordillera Central in the middle Río Cauca region also held key positions of regional influence, although the level of political elaboration reached by Dabeiba and the Quimbaya societies was not as great as that achieved by the Muisca, Cenú and Tairona. Additional polities of comparable regional significance undoubtedly existed, including Tamalameque, on the lower Magdalena River not far from its confluence with the Río César and Thamara, somewhere on the Río César.

Surrounding these focal polities of highest political elaboration or greatest regional influence were relatively smaller, often rather militant, and perhaps less complex societies, whose leaders' prestige and authority may have derived to a considerable extent from their involvement in networks of elite associations which centred upon the focal polities. In at least one region, a rather secluded section of the middle Magdalena river valley, rank societies were apparently absent, possibly because of the inability of local tribal leaders to interact effectively in the association networks which sustained the high position of political elites elsewhere.

The powerful position enjoyed by rulers of the Muisca, Tairona and Cenú, and the prestige held by the lords of Dabeiba and the major Quimbaya polities, was heralded in part by these leaders' access to or control over certain scarce and highly valued resources, either naturally occurring or crafted, which were greatly desired by elites throughout the country and, accordingly, were widely distributed through the networks of elite associations. For example, the highland domains of the Muisca included emerald mines and the coastal domains of the Tairona yielded fine sea shells. The Spanish *conquistadores* found Muisca emeralds in Tairona, while Taironian sea shells adorned distant Muisca chiefs and hung before the doorways of their dwelling compounds. The Muisca, the Cenú and the Tairona were famous, too, for the fine textiles

and delicate gold and tumbaga pieces crafted by skilled specialists working under the authority of the elite. These goods were also widely distributed, as was salt prepared by the Muisca from highland salt springs and by the Tairona and Cenú from coastal sources. Similarly, the lord of Dabeiba was renowned for the gold pieces crafted at his elite centre, which were distributed through elite networks as far away as Panama. In like fashion, the Quimbaya realm included productive gold fields and salt springs, and Quimbaya craftsmen were highly skilled in weaving and probably also in metallurgy. Once again, salt, textiles and gold and tumbaga objects were exchanged both with neighbouring peoples and with more distant groups.

The lords of lesser chiefdoms surrounding these focal polities were drawn into the elite exchange network in various ways. In some cases they were able to inject a vital resource, such as salt, into the distributional flow, receiving in turn valued elite goods produced elsewhere. Alternatively, these lesser lords controlled local production of raw materials required by craftsmen at major elite centres. Highland Muisca weavers, for example, depended on raw cotton grown in lower *tierra templada* and *tierra caliente* zones of the Cordillera Oriental and middle Magdalena river valley by non-Muisca peoples, who exchanged local raw materials for finished products from the highlands. Similarly, the populace of some Quimbaya polities produced raw cotton, while other Quimbayan groups specialized in spinning and weaving. Muisca goldsmiths acquired raw metal from mining peoples further south on the upper Magdalena river in exchange for salt, textiles and emeralds. The metallurgists of Dabeiba, of the lowland Cenú and of the Quimbaya acquired much of their raw gold from the *caciques* directing the famous Buritican mines high in the Medellín area of the rugged Central Cordillera in exchange for finished gold pieces, agricultural products, salt, textiles, dried fish and war captive slaves, all of which undoubtedly enhanced the power of the local lords.

The records also indicate logistical means whereby lords of the lesser domains played their part in operating the far-flung elite distribution networks. For example, at one point on the lengthy trail connecting the Buritican mines with the elite crafting centres of the northern lowlands local lords controlled a vital bridge across the Río Cauca and extracted a toll from those who wished to pass.² Other local lords, particularly

² Luis Duque Gómez, *Prehistoria*, tomo II, *Tribus indígenas y sitios arqueológicos* (Bogotá, 1967), 207–8.

those situated between major highland and lowland elite centres, may have benefited from roles as middlemen in the exchange of interior mountain goods and lowland products. A number of sites on the borders of contrasting ecological zones or between major watersheds served as central exchange points to which elite representatives, often termed 'merchants' in the European literature, brought valued products from interior mountains and from coastal or interior lowlands. Such exchange centres included Tahami on the Cauca river close to the Magdalena rivershed, where mountain foothills approach northern lowlands, Tamalameque on the lower Magdalena close to the confluence with the Río César, Sorocota on the northern borders of Chibcha territory close to the middle Magdalena, and Ibaqué in the heights of the Central Cordillera where Quimbaya peoples of the Cauca valley met with emissaries from the Magdalena valley and the Muisca domain. It is very likely that the local lords of these exchange localities benefited politically from the barter, particularly if they guaranteed the 'peace of the market' (for border zones could be places of warfare) for those who came from near and far to exchange goods.

Although the words 'merchants' and 'market' appear above, it must be emphasized that the regional and long-distance elite contacts which were given material expression in the exchange of valued resources had political and ideological, as much as, or perhaps even more than, economic significance. Many of the scarce and valued goods exchanged, not only the emeralds, gold pieces and fine textiles but also such products as salt, dried fish and war captive slaves, were most likely highly charged with political-religious symbolism signifying the sacredness, efficacy and authority of chiefship. There is evidence that the mining of gold and of emeralds was a sacred activity, requiring preparatory ritual; weaving was apparently regarded in this light too. Furthermore, at elite centres such as Dabeiba, the Cenu capitals of Finzenu and Ayapel, Guatavita in the Muisca realm and many others the dwelling places for chiefs and priests and the centres for the crafting of sumptuary goods were directly associated with shrines or temples. These sites also served as places of pilgrimage or as elite necropolises. Finally, to the extent that, in chiefdom cosmologies, geographical distance was correlated with supernatural distance, as was suggested in the introduction, sacred significance accrued to all goods derived from, and activities associated with, regions and peoples remote from a given political centre. Factors such as these should warn against

a strictly economic interpretation of pre-Columbian long-distance exchange.

The densely populated and highly complex chiefdoms of the Muisca, Tairona and Cenú rested on an extremely productive subsistence base with intensive agriculture and fishing, and with hunting as a significant supplementary activity. The fertile and well-watered *altiplanos* inhabited by the Muisca produced a variety of agricultural products, including potatoes and quinoa, some of which were probably grown on ridged planting beds raised above the wet basin floors to regulate moisture. Hillsides may have been terraced or cultivated by slash-and-burn techniques. Rich aquatic resources, particularly fish and water fowl, were available in rivers and bodies of stagnant water, or *pantanos*, scattered throughout the valleys. Special fish ponds were constructed in *pantanos* and on rivers too. The Spaniards also commented on the abundance of deer in the Muisca territory, but deer hunting was an activity restricted to elites.

Both venison and the contributions of agricultural produce tendered by heads of local kinship and territorial groups (*uta*) to community leaders, and by them to higher lords, were kept in storehouses (which also held weapons and sumptuary goods such as goldwork) built in the enclosed dwelling compound of the lord. These foodstuffs supported priests and warriors on duty and probably provided comestibles for periodic ceremonies and celebrations. In addition to gifts of produce, the local populace accorded personal services to the local lord, cultivating his fields and building his enclosure and dwelling place.

The population and ceremonial centres of the Cenú chiefdoms were located near the major rivers which crossed the northern lowlands close to large *ciénagas* or seasonal lakes. Typically they were surrounded by grassy savannah which eventually gave way to wooded hill slopes. It is likely that slash-and-burn agriculture was practised on these wooded slopes at the outer margins of the savannahs. Possibly a more intensive and permanent type of agriculture was conducted on ridged fields situated on the margins of *ciénagas* and on the backslopes of natural levees along the major rivers. The rivers themselves provided extraordinarily rich fishing, and both rivers and *ciénagas* supported a tremendous diversity of edible land and water life, including turtles, manatee, iguanas, caimen, capybara, paca and waterfowl. The grassy savannahs supported deer, rabbits, peccary and ground birds. These abundant resources provisioned the general population living in small

communities scattered over upland interfluvies and the elite inhabiting the large crafting and ceremonial centres.

The inhabitants of the well-ordered towns and temple-filled ceremonial centres of the Tairona used ditch and canal irrigation to water the fields and stone-supported terraces that covered the lower slopes of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta for many miles. Arboriculture, hunting and, particularly, fishing augmented the diverse and abundant agricultural products.

Judging from the reports of the *conquistadores*, even the lands of smaller or relatively less important polities were well populated and well cultivated, sometimes by swidden techniques, sometimes by local irrigation or ridged field systems. Fishing and hunting were also cited as productive enterprises in virtually all regions. In the middle Cauca valley, to take one more example, the river proper and adjacent marshlands of the hot valley floor yielded excellent fishing, while the cooler mountain slopes provided well-drained and probably fairly permanent kitchen gardens close to comfortable and defensible house sites situated near streams and springs. Extensive field and tree plots and a variety of wild game were available farther upslope.

The basic culture patterns and political forms characteristic of the northern Colombian Andes and Caribbean lowlands were also found in lower Central America (Costa Rica and Panama) and in northern Venezuela. On the basis of the distribution of goldwork and other sumptuary goods it is further postulated that elites of both these regions engaged in long-distance contacts with the elite centres of those portions of Colombia closest to their territories. In this sense lower Central America and northern Venezuela may be regarded as part of a complex political-ideological interaction sphere affecting the diverse elite systems of much of north-western South America and lower Middle America.

The narrow stretch of land composing Panama and Costa Rica contains interior mountain ranges descending on both the Caribbean and Pacific versants to varying amounts of coastal lowlands. Frequently the domain under the control of a given chief included an ecologically diverse strip of land centring on one or more river valleys and extending from interior mountain heights to lowland littoral. In some cases these lands were divided, with interior mountain territory under the control of one lord while lower slopes and coastal shores were controlled by

another. Available evidence suggests that a chief's domain tended to include the territory within one-half to one day's travel from the centre of power.

Judging from the Spanish accounts, the highest level of organizational complexity evidenced by the several dozen rank societies of lower Central America was closer to that attained by Dabeiba or by the larger Quimbaya chiefdoms in Colombia than to the polities of the Muisca, Cenu' or Tairona, whose elite centres were significantly more elaborate than any described for Panama or Costa Rica. Furthermore, there are no indications of intensive irrigation or ridged field agricultural techniques for lower Central America. Instead swidden horticulture with digging sticks predominated on the open lowlands and slopes of the sierras. There is some evidence, however, that women and children captured in war were used as agricultural labourers. If so, even slash-and-burn agriculture might have been notably productive.

Additional foodstuffs derived from pejivalle palms and other fruit-bearing trees and from land game and wild fowl. River and ocean fish, manatee and sea turtle were particularly abundant too. Indeed, the rich aquatic resources of rivers and ocean were as fundamental as agriculture to the support of the sizeable populations indicated by the *conquistadores*. No regular chiefly tribute was collected in lower Central America, although personal services and labour were expected when the chief requested them for house building, for planting, fishing or hunting for his use and at time of war. On such occasions the lord distributed food and drink from storehouses replete with dried meat and fish, agricultural produce and various fermented drinks or *chichas*.

In Panama and Costa Rica, as in Colombia, a cluster of highly influential focal polities can again be discerned. Each regionally dominant lord was in turn supported by a political hinterland of allied or subordinate elites whose ties with the central ruler were sometimes strengthened by marriage, for polygyny was common among elites both here and in Colombia. The elite centres of the focal polities were situated at strategic locations on major travel routes by which long-distance contacts and the exchange of valued scarce resources were effected. In Panama, for example, the lord of the town of Darién on the Gulf of Urabá received gold from Dabeiba via the Río Atrato. Similarly, the elite centre of Comogre, strategically situated in the Sierra del Darién at the headwaters of the Río Bayano and Río Chucunaque, received pearls and raw gold from Pacific coastal regions and south-west Panama

in return for textiles and war captive slaves. The capital town of Veragua, close to the Caribbean coast in north-western Panama, was another busy exchange centre where hammered gold pieces were crafted. In Costa Rica the renowned lords of the so-called Eastern Guêtar and Western Guêtar controlled domains strategically situated in or near the *mesa central*, in the mountainous heartland of central Costa Rica, close to headwaters of two major travelways, the Río Reventazan, which flows into the Caribbean, and the Río Grande de Terraba, which courses to the Pacific.

Although much of the raw gold, pearls, textiles and other products exchanged among lower Central American elites probably remained in the region, some undoubtedly moved into north-western South America through contacts between Panamanian regional elites and the lords of nearby Colombian centres such as Dabeiba and Cenú. Elite valuables, including cast gold and tumbaga ornaments, were probably received in return by lower Central American lords. This argument rests largely on the fact that, although quantities of elaborate cast gold and tumbaga pieces are known from pre-Columbian Panama and Costa Rica, there are no data in the sixteenth-century records clearly indicating the practice of complex metallurgy, including alloying or casting, in Panama or Costa Rica at that time, although this possibility cannot be dismissed.³

Both the culture patterns and the topography of northern Venezuela were not unlike those of lower Central America. The Colombian Cordillera Oriental extends into this territory, breaking into several smaller mountain chains. One range, the Sierra de Perija, extends along the western side of Lake Maracaibo, while a second, the Cordillera de

³ For a fuller discussion of the author's position on this controversial question, see Helms, *Ancient Panama*. The documents do indicate that raw gold was available in lower Central America and that simple hammering was practised by craftsmen at the regional centres of Darién and Veragua and at mountain sites close to Comogre. Surface enrichment of tumbaga pieces by the acid bath process known as *mise-en-couleur* is noted, too, and could be interpreted as evidence for casting. Surface treatment of alloys by various methods was a separate and distinct development in South American metallurgy, however, and its use in lower Central America need not automatically indicate casting. See Heather Lechtman, 'Issues in Andean metallurgy', paper read at the Conference on South American Metallurgy, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, 1975. Alternatively, it should be noted that data from the early seventeenth century give evidence of tumbaga-casting in the Talamancan region of south-eastern Costa Rica, and circumstantial evidence from the sixteenth century allows the possibility that more complex metallurgy was practised at a Talamancan regional centre at the time of initial European contact. See the report of Fray Agustín de Zevallos in León Fernández, *Colección de documentos para la historia de Costa Rica* (Paris, 1886), v, 158–9. Recently, too, a casting mould has been found in Guanacaste, Costa Rica.

Merida or Venezuelan Andes, stretches north-east along the southern end of the lake and then, under the name of the Cordillera de la Costa, runs parallel to the Caribbean coast of northern Venezuela. According to sixteenth-century accounts, the Venezuelan Andes and the Cordillera de la Costa were the most densely populated sections of the country. The populace formed rank societies whose organization may well have been more complex than is indicated by the ethnohistorical data remaining to us, since massive European slaving had drastically reduced most northern Venezuelan societies by the early sixteenth century.

In the high, *tierra fria* portions of the Venezuelan Andes intensive agriculture utilizing terracing and irrigation and supplemented by hunting supported a dense population. Weaving, salt production and crafting of nephrite and serpentine provided sumptuary resources both for local elite use and for regional exchange with the lowlands closer to Lake Maracaibo. Textiles and salt also probably facilitated the long-distance contacts which yielded rough stone for crafting and finished golden pendants. The latter probably derived from adjacent portions of Colombia, readily contacted by the Río Espíritu Santo, since as yet there is no clear evidence of metallurgy in north-western Venezuela. These activities, together with sacred shrines and complex burials, suggest a general cultural pattern and, perhaps, level of political organization broadly comparable to those of the Tairona of north-eastern Colombia.

On the lower slopes of the Venezuelan Andes, in the *tierra templada*, hoe agriculture, rather than irrigation, predominated and burials were simpler than in the *tierra fria* zone. The general level of political development here invites comparisons with the more modestly organized Panamanian chiefdoms or with the polities of the Cauca valley of Colombia. Yet it is likely that the elites of these lower mountain regions had achieved considerable status, perhaps benefiting politically from roles as middlemen in the exchange of highland and lowland resources between *tierra fria* groups and those residing in the Lake Maracaibo lowlands or, for those resident on the southern slopes of the mountains, between *tierra fria* peoples and lowland groups of the Venezuelan *llanos*.

Around Lake Maracaibo the main subsistence activities were fishing in the lake itself and adjacent rivers and lagoons and agriculture and hunting in the fertile lacustrine and riverine lowlands near the lake. Although hunting, fishing, gathering and agriculture were all pursued to varying degrees by the diverse peoples of the lake and interior

regions, nonetheless, notable economic symbioses existed both between lake fishermen and lowland agriculturists and between these agricultural groups and mountain peoples in the ranges to south and west.

East of Lake Maracaibo numerous rank societies apparently flourished along the coast and paralleling mountain ranges of northern Venezuela, each polity probably being composed of an ecologically diverse strip of land extending from mountains to sea, as was common in Panama. Marine products were abundant, and mountain agriculture included canal irrigation. Numerous fortified towns were also situated along the banks of the Yaracuy river, which facilitated travel between the coast and the irrigated Barquisimeto valley in the interior. The nearby Cojedes river extended travel routes to llanos peoples to the south. Sumptuary elite goods, including gold pieces and pearls, indicate that northern Venezuelan elite long-distance networks ultimately reached the llanos to the south, Colombia to the west, and the 'Pearl Coast' of Venezuela further east.

Spanish accounts indicate that warfare was conducted as actively as exchange in these northern reaches of Venezuela. Here, as in Colombia and lower Central America, militancy produced captives who could be exchanged for other valuables, such as salt or coca, and who were also expected to serve as labourers for the conquering community. The economic significance of this added manpower is not clear, but agricultural productivity could have been increased significantly. The data also strongly suggest, however, that warfare, like long-distance exchange, was conducted for the political benefit of war leaders and other elites as much as, or more than, for economic gain. Captives, like other valuable goods, carried political and ideological as much as economic significance. Such persons were not regarded as impersonal slaves. Indeed, captives were often incorporated into their captors' groups by marriage, and the children of these unions became fully legitimate members of society.

The richness and diversity of natural resources and the circumscribing factors inherent in rugged topography undoubtedly influenced the development of rank societies in the mountainous islands of the Greater Antilles, as they did elsewhere in the circum-Caribbean. Here, as in Panama, northern Venezuela and portions of Colombia, many chiefdoms centred on fertile mountain valleys traversed by rivers running from interior mountain heights to the sea and providing access to the

resources of the littoral, cultivable grasslands, and waterways. A few polities seem to have been located on the upper portions of rivers in mountainous, interior country away from direct contact with lower savannahs and coastal reaches, but with equivalent benefits from small yet well-watered highland basins.

The Spanish chroniclers emphasized the bountiful subsistence resources available to the islanders. River, lake and ocean fish, land birds and water fowl, crabs, lobsters, sea turtles and manatee were all abundant, although game, in contrast, was limited. Some of these wild resources were husbanded; there is mention of artificial fish and turtle enclosures and of large compounds for land birds. The islanders also intensively cultivated the fertile river valleys and, to a lesser degree, grassy savannahs, producing a number of food staples and useful materials, including cotton and tobacco. Not surprisingly, given the wealth of protein-rich fish, fowl and other aquatic animals, starchy root crops formed the primary agricultural staples, although a range of other foods were grown too. Plots were cleared by slash-and-burn techniques and planted with digging sticks. Where conditions allowed, the soil was heaped into rows of large flat-topped hills or *montones* which may have improved and stabilized drainage. In valleys on the leeward side of Hispaniola, however, where annual rainfall is low, ditch irrigation was practised.

Some agricultural, fishing and hunting activities were directed by the elite, probably to provision specific feasts and other elite-directed public functions. At harvest the population also offered gifts of first fruits to the chiefs. In addition, certain foods were reserved for the elite, including iguanas and a particular type of cassava cake.⁴ Most of the sumptuary goods which identified and glorified the Antillean elite were also produced within the islands, and it is not clear to what extent Antillean lords were engaged in long-distance contacts. They did exchange various prestige items among themselves in recognition of alliances, such as marriage, and as tokens of respect and esteem. These exchanges extended to nearby inter-island contacts, which were both numerous and frequent.

The elite of certain polities exercised some control over local production of specific valuables and, presumably, benefited politically

⁴ Iguanas were symbolically associated with lordship by the ancient Maya and, probably, by pre-Columbian Panamanians as well as the elites of the Greater Antilles. See Mary W. Helms, 'Iguanas and crocodilians in tropical American mythology and iconography with special reference to Panama', *Journal of Latin American Lore*, 3 (1977), 51-132.

by their distribution to a wider region. For example, rich salt beds on the southern coast of Puerto Rico may have been associated with the domain of the highest chief of the island, who also lived on this particular coast because of its fishing advantages. Similarly, the domain of a leading *cacica* of western Hispaniola included the off shore island of Guahaba where women fashioned elaborately carved basins, platters, stools (*dubos*) and other items for elite use from a black wood, perhaps of the ebony family, which took a high polish.

Finely woven textiles decorated with coloured stones and small gold pieces were also used to indicate elite status. Placer gold, which existed in Hispaniola, Puerto Rico and Cuba, was hammered into thin sheets and leaves for helmets, ear and nose pieces, and other body ornaments. Since there is no evidence for casting or other complex metallurgical skills in the islands, the small amounts of tumbaga that are known from the Greater Antilles must have derived from mainland South America, presumably through a network of elite contacts. Similar associations may have provided the nephrite, jadeite, calcite and other stones made into strings of beads highly prized by elites.

Elite settlements were composed of twelve to fifteen large, conical structures each housing, probably, a kin group of several families most of whom may have been related to the chief whose large and elaborately decorated dwelling place formed the focus of the elite centre. (Commoners' house clusters were typically located near rivers or on the savannahs near fields.) In front of the chief's abode a flat or levelled plaza was generally located for public functions. Some of these plazas also served as playing courts for a team ball game called *batey*. At times *batey* games included contests between teams representing competitive and rivalrous chiefs. Formal warfare, ostensibly over such matters as trespassing on hunting or fishing rights, or a breach of marriage agreement between one lord and another lord's sister or daughter, also served as a vehicle for expressing chiefly power to elite rivals.

A successful chief was supported by a large consanguineous descent group and, through polygyny, had numerous affinal ties to other elite families. He was also a successful war leader and the proud owner of an elaborately decorated dugout canoe suitable for sea travel and capable of carrying as many as 50 men or more. A lord's expertise as war leader and canoe owner testified to his ability as an organizer and leader of men, whether into battle on land or into the hazards of ocean travel to near or distant lands. However, the sacred zöomorphie and

anthropomorphic symbols (*cemis*) painted on warriors' bodies, beaten onto pieces of gold worn by elites in battle, and carved and painted on canoes and innumerable other objects, testified that these and other chiefly capabilities were thought to derive fundamentally from supernatural powers. They were therefore expressions of sacred forces as much as declarations of human rivalries and ambitions. Association with sacred esoteric powers, in turn, further legitimized the role of a chief as an anomalous being who stood between society and higher sacred realms. It is understandable, then, that in the Greater Antilles and throughout the circum-Caribbean a lord's responsibilities also included the obligation to 'travel' by means of trance to distant sacred realms above and below the earth to discourse with supernatural beings concerning the affairs of the populace under his charge and to gain prophetic insight into future events.

Evidence about the native cultures of the Lesser Antilles is primarily derived from early seventeenth-century observations on the islands of Dominica, Guadeloupe and St Christopher. This information indicates that the indigenous Callinago, or so-called Island Carib, did not achieve the complex hierarchical social and political organization characteristic of their Greater Antillean neighbours. Instead, the Callinago maintained a more tribal or egalitarian socio-political organization, although specific political and ideological elements elaborated in Greater Antillean culture are also found here, albeit in simpler form.

By virtue of their island habitats the Callinago also enjoyed access to the rich resources of the Caribbean Sea. Fish, lobsters and crabs, sea turtles and manatee were dietary staples. So were agoutis, the most important land animal. Sea products and land game were complemented by slash-and-burn root crop agriculture.

Callinago settlements were small, containing approximately 30 to 100 individuals and, typically, were located close to a freshwater river. A village was usually composed of the extended family of a leading 'man of importance' who resided virilocally with his several wives, for headmen practised polygyny and also received women captured in war. His married daughters and their children and husbands lived there, too, since men other than headmen lodged uxorilocally.⁵ In physical form

⁵ Virilocal residence refers to a pattern of marital residence in which the married couple become part of the husband's natal household or community. In uxorilocal marital residence the couple joins the natal household or community of the wife.

a village included a capacious community house set in the midst of a clearing where the headman, his sons-in-law and older boys spent their days when they were at home. Surrounding this large structure were a number of small sleeping and kitchen quarters, one for each wife and her daughters and young sons.

A village headman's position of leadership was largely expressed in the size of his family and particularly in his control over unmarried sons and resident sons-in-law, who cleared gardens, built houses and went fishing for him. Headmen were also likely to have wives in other villages, even on other islands, whom they periodically visited. Such ties presumably extended a leader's sphere of personal influence beyond his immediate community. Warfare, usually against other Antillean peoples far from home, even against groups on Trinidad or the adjacent South American mainland, was another avenue leading to political prestige for those few whose endurance and bravery on raids and wisdom as war counsellors led to their acceptance as war leaders. Men who owned and directed the large canoes in which the long journeys to opponents' islands were made also held positions of honour and influence.

Successful warfare, in the form of surprise raids, netted prestige for victorious warriors and valuable long-distance booty including captive women who were delivered by the young warriors to their fathers and grandfathers to serve as wives. The children of these women became fully legitimate community members, and it is likely that acquisition of captive women and control over their children assisted a village headman to develop his political base of sons and sons-in-law.

The three routes to political influence in Callinago society – direction of a large family with many sons-in-law, war leadership and canoe ownership – were considered separate activities and could be held by different men whose influence was restricted to those specific situations requiring their particular expertise. It may be assumed, however, that the most successful Callinago leaders, including those few who were accorded wider regional recognition,⁶ were men who were able to achieve several of these positions. It is noteworthy that in the Greater Antilles the more developed role of chief combined all three of these leadership factors into a single position.

Successful Callinago leaders, like Greater Antillean chiefs, gave

* See Douglas Taylor, 'Kinship and social structure of the Island Carib', *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 2 (1946), 181.

material evidence of their status through adornment with valued ornaments, although sumptuary goods were used on a smaller scale than was common in the large islands. The most valued and prestigious items derived from the distant localities where warriors ventured. Foremost among these were the crescent-shaped golden chest plates, or *caracoli*, worn by leaders and their sons and acquired by exchange and raid from the north-eastern South American mainland.

The travels of the Callinago led them to the general region of Cumaná, the Gulf of Paria and the Orinoco delta, where contacts could be made with mainland peoples of north-eastern Venezuela, the eastern llanos and the lower Orinoco, as well as with groups from the Guianas further south. The populace of the north-east coast and adjacent Macizo Oriental, sustained by abundant fish and productive agriculture, were again organized into rank societies, although the politics toward the Gulf of Paria appear to have been smaller and organized in a less complex way than those further west. The contrast is exemplified by comparing the annually elected war chiefs of the Paria area with the regional lord of the Unare valley, Guaramental, who maintained a large, well-fortified elite centre with streets and plazas, storehouses for food and weapons and dwelling compounds for his many wives and sons and their retainers.

The low, open Unare river valley joins the interior llanos or savannahs of eastern Venezuela to the Caribbean coast and the mountain ranges running parallel to it to west and east. Undoubtedly the prestige and power of the dominant lord of this valley reflected his strategic position on an important travel and exchange route. Evidence from north-eastern Venezuela in general, indicates that a number of regional products, including fish, coca-lime paste, salt from the Araya peninsula and pearls from the waters around Cumaná, Cubagua and Isla de Margarita, were exchanged with peoples of more distant areas who offered in return maize, slaves and small pieces of worked gold said to derive from a coastal country six days travel to the west.

Among those contacting the north-eastern exchange centres were Carib from the eastern llanos lying between the coastal Macizo Oriental and the lower Orinoco river. Here again, as among the Callinago or Island Carib of the Lesser Antilles, political leadership was based on prowess in warfare and on control of groups of kinsmen and war captives. The women conducted subsistence agriculture along streams

and rivers, while the men hunted deer in the grassy *mesas* between river valleys and travelled widely to the Antilles, along the coasts of Guiana and Venezuela and along the Orinoco river system in order to raid and trade. Raiding and trading provided the Carib with a variety of useful resources including numerous war captives who, if men, were either ritually sacrificed or incorporated into Carib communities as sons-in-law, or, if women, were employed either in agriculture or as labourers on the long-distance excursions undertaken by Carib men.

The famed trading and raiding activities of the eastern llanos Carib were part of much larger and very complex networks of regional symbiosis and long-distance contacts which extended the length of the Orinoco river system. These associations involved the numerous sedentary populations of gallery forest and riverine floodplain agriculturists, the specialized river-fishing peoples resident along tributaries and the nomadic hunter-gatherers of the extensive interfluvial grasslands of the Venezuelan and eastern Colombian llanos lying north and west of the Orinoco. Distinctive bands of hunter-gatherers and particular communities of riverine agriculturists were linked in long-standing symbiotic relationships which provided agricultural resources for the hunter-gatherers and various palm products, wild fruits and meat for the horticulturists. These exchanges were effected at the agriculturists' villages through an elaborate system of somewhat strained hospitality frequently augmented by quick garden raids by the hunter-gatherers. Fishing communities entered this system by exchanging dried fish for agricultural produce. Such fish were particularly important for non-fishing groups during the rainy season when other foods were scarce.

Fishing groups also controlled dry season fishing camps at selected beaches and islands on the middle and upper Orinoco and its major tributaries where immense numbers of *arrau* turtles congregated annually to lay eggs. At such times thousands of other natives, both agriculturists and foragers, also travelled from near and far to the turtle beaches to collect turtle eggs and oil and to hunt the various forest animals which also came to the beaches to prey on the turtles. These immense gatherings of fishermen, horticulturists and hunters served also as large trade fairs, for a wide range of products from all sections of the Orinoco system and the llanos were exchanged on these occasions. The extensive bartering was facilitated by far-flung kin ties, which united specific families from various regions, by group

specialization in craft and resource production, by widely used trade languages known throughout the Orinoco system, by attention to norms of reciprocity such that he who received an exchange gift reciprocated with an object of slightly higher value, and by strings of snail shell discs called *quiripa* which served as 'primitive money'. Highly valued lengths of *quiripa* were also worn as adornments indicating personal wealth and status.

Dry-season, turtle-beach exchange fairs on the middle and upper Orinoco attracted Carib from the lower Orinoco and the eastern llanos, peoples from the Guiana highlands and representatives from north-western Amazonia. Similar dry-season, fish-camp exchange centres on rivers of the northern and western edges of the llanos at places where grasslands met the northern Venezuelan ranges and the Colombian Cordillera Oriental linked llanos groups to these highland regions, too. In this manner turtle products, raw cotton or cotton thread, feathers, body paint, resins and oils, and *quiripa* moved from the llanos to the mountains, while salt, gold and cotton textiles moved into the llanos from the adjacent Andean territories. By means of llanos exchange networks Andean products then moved throughout the length and breadth of northern South America. Indeed, the central location of the Orinoco river system and adjacent llanos was instrumental in connecting peoples and resources from all the adjoining circum-Caribbean lands.

It is worth noting that llanos and Orinoco groups acted largely as intermediaries in this inter-regional exchange, for, of the diverse goods which passed along the llanos and Orinoco networks, only the shell money and, perhaps, the turtle products were exclusively produced by llanos and Orinoco peoples.⁷ It is also significant that the goods received in the llanos from outside were not generally crucial to subsistence but were luxury items, such as elaborate textiles, finely woven hammocks and golden ornaments. Receipt of such 'political' materials suggests that activity within the exchange network conferred political benefits. Certainly the most complex llanos settlements and, probably, the most complex political organizations were located in restricted zones along the major Orinoco tributaries and along the lower slopes of the cordilleras to north and west, strategically placed for the northern South American spheres of interaction. Nevertheless, there is no clear evidence that rank societies existed in the llanos region. According to the

⁷ Robert V. Morey and Nancy C. Morey, *Relaciones comerciales en el pasado en los llanos de Colombia y Venezuela* (Caracas, 1975), 29–30.

ethnohistoric data, much of which, however, post-dates initial contact by several centuries, most village societies were directed by community headmen alone, although control of numerous wives and captive women and displays of *quiripa* could testify to the high personal prestige and community status of individual leaders.

